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ABSTRACT

Three areas of the literature on adult learning showing recent activity are transformative learning (TL), adult learning related to technology, and collaborative/group learning. Recent publications on TL include a critical review of the literature, discussion of TL's relationship to adult development, and description of TL in practice. Technological developments have also affected adult learning research and theory building. In adult education, technology is emerging as both a delivery system and a content area. Although learning in groups has had a long history in adult education, the focus has traditionally been on group processes. Recently, the emphasis has shifted to groups as learning environments and helping learners think about group learning as opposed to individual learning. Collaborative learning partnerships and the effect of technology on group learning are other aspects of group learning that have been explored. Other aspects of adult learning that have recently been examined are the relationship between power and gender and the connection between adult learning and social change. The continuing progress in adult learning research is the sign of a vital field, and the literature provides information that can be used to improve practice. (A 21-item annotated bibliography constitutes the majority of this document.) (MN)

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New Views of Adult Learning
Trends and Issues Alert No. 5

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

by Susan Imel

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New Views of Adult Learning

Adult learning is a huge enterprise, with activities exceeding the combined total of those taking place in elementary, secondary, and postsecondary institutions. Adults learn in a multitude of settings such as the home, the workplace, and community agencies, and for a variety of reasons— personal development, increased job knowledge, and community problem solving (Merriam and Caffarella 1999). A rich and varied literature base related to adult learning exists. This *Alert* examines some of the recent trends in this literature. An annotated list of resources follows.

Three areas showing recent activity are transformative learning, adult learning related to technology, and collaborative/group learning. Research and theory development in transformative learning have "taken center stage since the late 1960s" (Merriam and Caffarella 1999, p. 318). Among the many recent publications on transformative learning (TL) are a critical review of the literature (Taylor 1998); discussions of theoretical perspectives (Dirkx 1998) and TL's relationship to adult development (Hopson and Welbourne 1998); and a description of TL in practice (Livingston and Roth 1998). The keen interest in transformative learning may be explained by the fact that it is a theory of learning unique to adulthood (Taylor 1998).

Technological developments have also affected adult learning research and theory building. In adult education, technology is emerging as both a delivery system and a content area. Cahoon (1998), Davis and Denning (1998), and Graebner (1998) describe how technology is changing the delivery of adult learning. Technology as a content area in adult education is explored by Kasworm (1997) in a paper based on 3 years of helping faculty members learn computer technology.

Although learning in groups has had a long history in adult education, the focus has been on group process. Recently, the emphasis in the literature has been on groups as learning environments and on helping learners think about group–as opposed to individual– learning (Imel 1999). Collaborative learning partnerships (Saltiel, Sgroi, and Brockett 1998) are another aspect of group learning that has been explored. The effect of technology on group learning has also been investigated (Davis and Denning 1998; Graebner 1998).

Other areas of development in the literature on adult learning are represented by the emergence of a sociological perspective (Shirk 1996), discussions of power and gender (Goldberger et al. 1996; Hayes and Flannery 1997; Tisdell 1998), and explorations of the connection between adult learning and social change (Connolly et al. 1996; Livingston and Roth 1998). A constructivist perspective of adult learning is represented in work on situated cognition (Hansman and Wilson 1998) and experiential learning (Avis 1995; Johnston and Usher 1997).

The continuing progress in adult learning research and theory is the sign of a vital field, and the literature provides information that can be used to improve practice. The resources cited here are but a sample of the burgeoning literature base on adult learning, so readers should consult Merriam and Caffarella (1999)or search the ERIC database and the Web to locate additional information.

Resources

Avis, J. "The Validation of Learner Experience: A Conservative Practice?" ***Studies in the Education of Adults*** 27, no. 2 (October 1995): 173-186.

The anxieties associated with the use of learner experience in adult education are examined. Shows that the links between experience, knowledge, and practice to be confusing and contradictory.

Cahoon, B., ed. ***Adult Learning and the Internet. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, no. 78.*** San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Summer 1998.

Explores the effects of the Internet on adult learning, including learning facilitated through formal instruction and occurring spontaneously in the experiences of individuals and groups.

Connolly, B.; Fleming, T.; McCormack, D.; and Ryan, A., eds. ***Radical Learning for Liberation.*** Maynooth, Ireland: Centre for Adult and Community Education, Saint Patrick's College, 1996. (ED 415 439)

Contains six articles that comprise a critical discourse about theories, practices, and research focused on realizing the potential of adult learning to bring about change.

Davis, M., and Denning, K. "Learning in Virtual Space: Potential and Pitfalls in Electronic Communication." Paper presented at the 28th Annual SCUTREA Conference, Exeter, England, July 6-8, 1998. <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/000000712.htm>

Reports on the use of computer-mediated-communication (CMC) during the teaching of a postgraduate course, focusing on the extent of student interaction and the possible impact of the instructors' roles.

Dirkx, J. "Transformative Learning Theory in the Practice of Adult Education: An Overview." ***PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning*** 7 (1998): 1-14.

Summarizes four theoretical perspectives on transformative learning as consciousness raising, critical reflection, development, and individuation.

Goldberger, N. R.; Tarule, J. M.; Clinchy, B. M.; and Belenky, M. F., eds. ***Knowledge, Difference, and Power: Essays Inspired by "Women's Ways of Knowing."*** New York: Basic Books, 1996.

This book contains 14 essays exploring how the theory of women's psychology, development, and ways of knowing has developed during the past decade.

Graebner, C. "Enquiring into Group Learning On-Line." Paper presented at the 28th Annual SCUTREA Conference, Exeter, England, July 6-8, 1998. <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/000000717.htm>

Reflects on motives for researching computer-mediated communication discussions and the relationship of research styles to the interactions between individuals and groups in online distance learning. Suggests how a pluralistic investigative approach can support cooperative learning and reflective practice in online adult learning settings.

Hansman, C. A., and Wilson, A. L. "Cognition and Practice: Adult Learning Situated in Everyday Life." In ***Proceedings, 39th Annual Adult Education Research Conference***, compiled by J. C.

Kimmel. San Antonio, TX: University of the Incarnate Word, May 1998.

Theories and procedures used to teach adults to write often lack an understanding of the central constitutive dimensions of activity, tools, and culture in adult learning. A situated view of teaching writing is introduced.

Hayes, E., and Flannery, D. D. "Narratives of Adult Women's Learning in Higher Education: Insights from Graduate Research." ***Initiatives*** 58, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 61-80.

Reviews dissertation and thesis research that explores adult women's perspectives on their own learning. Key themes include personal development, ways of knowing, and marginality. One concern is the lack of any coherent line of research on women's learning. Discusses implications for practice and further research.

Hopson, P., and Welbourne, L. "Adult Development and Transformative Learning." ***International Journal of Lifelong Education*** 17, no. 2 (March-April 1998): 72-86.

Transformative adult development involves a qualitative change in world view with resulting tension and struggles of the production of new consciousness. Change occurs through a dialectic process of reconstructing meaning in new ways.

Imel, S. "Using Groups in Adult Learning: Theory and Practice." ***Journal of Continuing Education in the Health Professions*** 19, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 54-61.

Selected aspects of learning in groups, power, and the role of the facilitator are discussed and some suggestions for structuring group learning are provided.

Johnston, R., and Usher, R. "Re-theorising Experience: Adult Learning in Contemporary Social Practices." ***Studies in the Education of Adults*** 29, no. 2 (October 1997): 137-153.

Dominant models of experiential learning contain uncritical assumptions about experience. Locating experience in postmodern social practices emphasizes how it is shaped by culture. In critical practices, experience is not something from which knowledge can be derived but is itself knowledge.

Kasworm, C. E. "The Agony and the Ecstasy of Adult Learning: Faculty Learning Computer Technology." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, Cincinnati, Ohio, November 1997. (ED 416 402)

Presents findings from 3 years of helping faculty members learn computing technology. On the basis of the experiences of four faculty members, implications include the following: learning is based in the ego of the learner; learning is based in individual needs, interests, and timing of need to learn; and learning of computing technology is based in skills and knowledge of self-directed learning.

Livingston, D. W., and Roth, R. "Workplace Communities and Transformative Learning: Oshawa Autoworkers and the CAW." ***Convergence*** 31, no. 3 (1998): 12-23.

The experiences of Local 222 of the Canadian Auto Workers Union suggest that members' involvement in organized courses, participation in political education programs, and ongoing informal learning are helping to establish a grassroots, working-class social movement community.

Merriam, S. B., and Caffarella, R. S. ***Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide. 2d ed.*** San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999.

This book provides a comprehensive, up-to-date overview and synthesis of what is known about adult learning, including the context in which it takes place, who the participants are, what they learn and why, the nature of the learning process itself, and major theoretical developments.

Saltiel, I. M.; Sgroi, A.; and Brockett, R. G., eds. ***The Power and Potential of Collaborative Learning Partnerships. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, no. 79.*** San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Fall 1998.

Includes a collection of writings that describe a varied and broad range of collaborative partnerships in many different adult learning venues, including those involving two people, group situations where the effort is grounded in cooperation among members, and collaborative efforts where all members work to create new knowledge distinct from what each member brings to the group.

Shirk, J. "The Adult Learning: A Sociopsychological Perspective and Vignettes." Unpublished paper, September 1996. (ED 405 465)

Suggests that lifelong learning can be seen as an affective and cognitive activity that occurs in the life-space of the actor in response to positive or negative field forces at any given moment in time or across periods of time. A section of vignettes reporting the lifelong learning experiences of a variety of persons is included.

Taylor, E. W. ***The Theory and Practice of Transformative Learning: A Critical Review. Information Series no. 374.*** Columbus: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Center on Education and Training for Employment, the Ohio State University, 1998. (ED 423 422) <http://ericacve.org/mp_taylor_01.asp>

Reviews over 40 empirical and theoretical works on transformative learning, the process of making meaning from experience. Identifies unresolved issues and outlines the essential practices and conditions for fostering transformative learning in adults.

Tennant, M. ***Psychology and Adult Learning. 2d ed.*** San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.

This book provides a critical account of the psychological theories that have informed contemporary adult education theory and practice. Included are discussions of humanistic psychology and the self-directed learner, the psychoanalytic approach, development of identity during adulthood, development of intelligence and cognition, learning styles, behaviorism, group dynamics and the group facilitator, and critical awareness.

Tisdell, E. J. "Poststructural Feminist Pedagogies: The Possibilities and Limitations of Feminist Emancipatory Adult Learning Theory and Practice." ***Adult Education Quarterly*** 48, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 139-156.

Compares theoretical underpinnings of three strands of feminist pedagogy–psychological, structural, and poststructural–in relation to four themes: knowledge, construction, voice, authority, and positionality.

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